*

It wasn't unusual in the Harris-Bickle household that Nolan was out of the door before Grace was. He'd put on some extra coffee, prepare breakfast, then be on his way while she was still in the shower. He was up earlier than usual as he had some errands to run for Josh before he went to the office.

When he finally drove to work, turning onto the street that led to the office parking lot, he was surprised to see Grace's truck right in front of him. But it wasn't Grace driving it. She was in the passenger seat by the looks of it. It was Nate.

Nolan almost crouched down in his seat as a reaction. Why? He wasn't sure. Was he afraid they'd see him?

As if he hadn't seen them together often enough. As if he wasn't getting off to the thought of them being together, of them doing things behind closed doors…

But somehow, this felt different. He felt embarrassed. Nate was driving Grace's truck, something Nolan himself was never allowed to. It was his own fault, being a bit of a shitty driver, but seeing Nate there, as if he belonged there, was a small burn. But just a small one.

It wasn't the first time Nate hitched a ride or borrowed Grace's truck. His own car was barely working, and Grace was happy to let Nate use her truck when he needed it. There was no difference from most other mornings. Except that Nolan noticed that this was something that had become normal, apparently.

The two cars rolled into the parking lot. Nolan parked a few spaces away from Grace's truck, stepped out of his Equinox, and watched as Nate got out. Grace rounded the car to get in the

driver's seat. Nate exchanged a few words with her as they passed each other, earning a playful smirk from Grace before she got in the car and drove off.

Nolan felt his mouth dry. It wasn't unusual, no, but it was still something that had an effect on him.

Grace drove off. As Nate turned back toward the building, his gaze swept the parking lot and landed squarely on Nolan, still standing by his Equinox. A slow, knowing smirk spread across Nate's rugged face.

"Morning, Bickle." Nate's voice carried across the quiet lot. "That truck of yours runs better than my piece of shit Golf."

Nolan met his gaze evenly, refusing to look away. "It's Grace's truck. And she keeps it well-maintained."

Nate chuckled, the sound gravelly in the morning air. "Guess that makes her my personal Uber driver now." He took a step closer, lowering his voice slightly. "She doesn't let you drive it, huh?"

"Nope," Nolan replied.

"Funny," Nate said, looking over at where Grace's truck was leaving.

"She likes arriving alive," Nolan said.

"Still lets me, though," Nate tried.

"Your car has a hole in the fucking door, Nate," Nolan said. "Anything else?"

Nate held his gaze for another moment before shrugging. "Nah. Just making sure you were paying attention." He turned and walked toward the building, leaving Nolan standing alone with the echo of their encounter.

Nolan watched him go, the morning sun suddenly feeling too bright. He felt a mix of emotions swirling inside him - jealousy, arousal, and a strange sense of pride. Pride in Grace, for being so confident and desirable. Pride in himself, for being brave enough to let her explore this side of herself. Jealousy of how Nate had slotted himself into a position with Grace where they drove to work together. Of how they could possibly be seen like this. Everyone knew Grace was Nolan's girl.

He took a deep breath and walked into the building, ready to start his day.

The office was already buzzing with activity, the low hum of conversation and clicking keyboards creating a familiar backdrop to Nolan's morning routine. He made his way to his desk, dropping his briefcase beside his chair before heading to the small kitchenette to grab a coffee. As he poured the steaming liquid into his mug, he couldn't help but overhear a conversation between two of his colleagues.

"Did you see that campaign?" one of them asked, her voice filled with admiration. "The soap one?"

"Oh, I saw it," the other replied, her tone equally enthusiastic. "And I saw her. Grace Harris. She's absolutely stunning."

Nolan's chest swelled with pride. He took a slow sip of his coffee, savoring the warmth as he listened to their praise of Grace. They were right. She was stunning. And she was all his... well, mostly.

Nolan spent the morning going over reports for his little department, checking in on all the salespeople to see if they were on top of their accounts. He also had his own set of accounts that

he needed to make sure were not lagging. He saw an opportunity to perhaps go to El Paso again, and wondered if he should bring Grace.

The day lolled by for a while, and Nolan took the time to answer a few emails. He was in the middle of replying to a particularly lengthy email from a client in San Antonio, when he looked up from his desk and peered out into the open office landscape. Nate just came out from Josh's office, and he looked unreasonably pleased with himself.

He didn't go to his desk; instead, he came over to Nolan's office, gave a short knock before entering.

"Need the boss man's wisdom," he said, somehow making asking for help irritating. "You're among Josh's most trusted men around these parts. It's an Entrendy contract."

Nate paused. He knew what that meant. Entrendy was Josh's passion. It was his clothing company, and ninety-nine percent of those contracts went to Josh's sister. But with everything going on, Miss Calhoun was not able.

"He saw my work with the soap campaign and thought I could handle this too," Nate said. "Massive, right?"

"Indeed," Nolan said, unfazed. "What's the line?"

"It's a swim slash resortwear campaign. Attractive model plus swimwear plus clean photography," Nate said.

Nolan had to chuckle. "You need more than that. This is Entrendy."

Nate looked annoyed that Nolan's advice was actually needed. Nolan suspected he had come to gloat, perhaps rub it in his face. But like Nolan had said. This was Entrendy. Not to be treated lightly. Mirella would roast Nate alive if he fucked it up. And maybe Nolan too.

"You're making it look too much like fashion. Entrendy isn't high fashion. It's stylish casual wears. You need to sell the lifestyle. Sell that *you* can look *this* good."

Nate shifted in his chair, still annoyed with Nolan giving useful advice.

"Meaning?"

"You can't throw a model up against a white backdrop," Nolan said. That wasn't what Nate would do, but he was putting it on its edge. "We need to see the model use it in a real setting. A pool, move around in it, towels, sun. Getting out of the water, lounging, laughing, activity that is aspirational and active, and most importantly, dynamic. We need to want to be the model. And we need a model who's athletic and has a confident aura too, who looks good but also looks like she actually wears the clothes instead of somebody standing perfectly still in them."

"Women want to look good, men want women to look good. Shouldn't an attractive model and a swimsuit be enough?"

Nate asked the question, but Nolan could see the old rugged man think it through, and that Nolan was right. Nolan saw the cogs turn inside his older neighbor's head. The man gave a crooked smirk as he was digesting what Nolan had said.

"Hell, Josh even has a giant pool with beautiful surroundings," Nolan said.

"I'm aware of it," Nate said, nodding. "Not bad, Bickle."

"That's what I'm here for. Supervise you youngsters," Nolan joked, genuinely pleased he was able to help. "You've got the soap campaign in the bag; this should be easy for you."

"Of course," Nate said. "The pool might actually be a good idea. The crew I use can only do Saturday afternoon or Sunday. Studio's fucked for both. Josh wants a quick turnaround in case he needs to change the design before the line launches."

"There you go. Then use Josh's pool on Sunday. I can talk to him, if you want."

"Yeah, I was just in there. Don't wanna overstay my welcome, eh?" Nate chuckled. "Heh, concept, location, day of shooting, you really work out some mean logistics, don't you, Nolan?"

Nolan waved it off like he knew Josh would've. Nate's expression darkened for a small, almost unnoticeable moment. As much as Nate chuckled, Nolan saw that the man was still irritated. He had come to gloat, and now Nolan had managed to more or less orchestrate his success for him.

"Like I said, that's what I'm here for. I know sales, and I know Entrendy."

"Well, since you're on a roll," Nate said, getting out of the chair with a grunt.

He went over to the door, stepped out to where his desk was, and came back with a giant folder. Like, an old-fashioned portfolio folder. Nolan raised an eyebrow as the folder was thrown onto his desk.

"You asked for advice, not an intern," Nolan said, poking at the folder with his pencil. "Archaic."
"And here I thought supervisors were supposed to help their people," Nate said with a grin.

"I am. Sit," Nolan replied, waving at the opposite him. "These are models you've worked with before?"

"Something like that," Nate grunted. "I thought since you obviously know what we're looking for..."

Nolan looked through a few of the girls. The first one. She was beautiful, obviously. Almost blond, with bright eyes, and a decent build. Her resumé was stacked, and she looked like she knew what she was doing. But perhaps too posed, too polished. She looked like the fashion model Nate would've used initially. Well, it was his folder of models after all. Nolan didn't dislike her, though. She would do a tremendous job.

"We need someone athletic, who emanates a certain aura, who can look good just doing stuff, somebody who... almost effortlessly is what everyone wants to be," Nolan said, more to himself than anything. It was what he had said before, but he just needed to summarize it to himself.

Nate paid attention regardless. He had gone more quiet than usual.

"What?" Nolan asked.

"Nothing," he said, flatly. "So this one?" he asked, tapping the image of the model.

Nolan nodded, and Nate grabbed the folder, heading out to his desk, seemingly pleased with such a strong start on the project.

The rest of the day, Nolan worked on Nuevo's launch, and he had to admit that this new influencer angle was fun. The old Mexican fellow was certainly interesting, and he had some very smart people around him. Their main designer had shown a collection that was colorful and fun. It was like a party on a plate, and Nolan was loving it.

He also took some time to check with Josh about using his pool. It would never have been an issue; Josh was generous like that, but it was another box checked off.

Once the office was growing quieter and most people had headed home, Nolan felt himself ready to get home for the day. He usually left around five PM anyway. There were a few people who worked on that political campaign, and they'd be here a while, and there would probably be some sort of night shift too, but that wasn't Nolan's problem.

But fifteen minutes before Nolan would normally leave, Nate returned, sticking his head through the door.

"Got five minutes?" he asked.

Nolan checked his watch. "Five," Nolan said, taking his seat again, waving for Nate to do the same.

"The shot list. You had some strong indications on what would represent Entrendy best," Nate began, holding a storyboard in his hand that he laid on Nolan's desk. "I just feel like I've covered the basics, and but I don't know the lay of the land sort to speak. I've been to Josh's once, and I was, erh, preoccupied."

"Can't you go up there?"

"I will, but I'm starting to think that I might need a televised commercial here, or something to run as ads on YouTube or whatever. I get what you want out of it, and I agree, but pictures might not be enough to get just what we want," Nate said.

Nolan leaned back, eyeing something on a lamp somewhere behind Nate. This was such a nothing burger.

"Do the pilot, and you'll see," Nolan said.

"Yes, but then I need something more than basic shots to really emphasize what I wanna do here," Nate insisted. "I haven't done a lot of filming, to be honest. Not like this."

Nolan leaned forward, elbows resting on his desk, fingers steepled as he studied Nate's storyboard. The storyboard was a mess of half-formed ideas and disconnected shots. Nate watched him, waiting.

"Look," Nolan began, tapping a finger against one of the sketches of a model lounging by a pool. "You're thinking of this like a television commercial, but that's not how you sell this kind of lifestyle anymore. You're thinking too big and too small at the same time. You want a televised commercial? That's old money thinking. We need to be smart about this."

He slid the storyboard back across the desk toward Nate. "First, you're overthinking it. A fifteen-second Instagram reel will give us a lot better reach than some expensive commercial nobody will watch. We want something that feels authentic, not polished. Something that makes people stop scrolling."

Nate frowned, his brow furrowed in concentration. "So, less professional?"

"Not less professional," Nolan corrected, a small smile playing on his lips. "More authentic. Think about it. People don't want to see a perfect model in a perfect setting. Like I said already, they want to see someone they can relate to, someone who looks like they're actually having fun, not just posing for a camera."

He stood up, walking over to the whiteboard in his office and grabbing a marker. "Second, you're thinking of it backwards. You're starting with the product and trying to build a story around it. That's not how it works. You start with the story, and the product becomes part of that story."

He started sketching on the whiteboard, rough stick figures coming to life under his hand. "Picture this. A woman - our model - is laughing as she dives into the pool. Water splashes everywhere. She comes up, slicking her hair back, and the camera catches the way the swimsuit clings to her, how it moves with her. It's not about showing off the swimsuit; it's about showing off the feeling of freedom, of joy. The swimsuit is just what she's wearing while she's having that experience."

Nate watched, his expression shifting from skepticism to something like understanding. "So, more action, less posing?"

"Exactly," Nolan said, capping the marker. "And we don't need a fancy location or a big production crew. Josh's pool is perfect. We can shoot it on a Sunday morning when the light is good, and we'll have something that feels real. People will see it and think, 'I want to feel like that.'"

He sat back down, looking at Nate expectantly. "So, what do you think? Can you work with that?"

Nate was quiet for a long moment, studying the whiteboard. Then, he looked at Nolan, a slow smile spreading across his face. "Not bad, Bickle. Not bad at all."

Nolan checked his watch again. Fifteen minutes had passed since Nate first stuck his head in his door. He should have been heading home by now, but instead, he found himself talking shop with Nate.

Nolan grabbed his phone and shot Grace a quick message that he'd be late.

"Grace?" Nate asked.

"Yeah."

Nate checked his own watch. "Moving your plans for me again, Bickle?"

"I'm finishing my job," Nolan replied with a shrug.

"Sure you are," Nate said. "Every time I need something, you two seem to find room."

"Don't flatter yourself," Nolan said, though felt his cheeks heat up a bit.

"I'm not. I'm thanking you, if anything," Nate chuckled. "You're a generous guy, Bickle, I'll give you that."

Nolan looked up, staring over at Nate. "You done?"

"Just saying," Nate said. "Dinners, dates. Now this."

"You needed help, I helped," Nolan replied simply.

"Yeah, you do that a lot."

"And you're still sitting in my office asking for it."

Nate's smile thinned, and lost a bit of that snarky bullshittery to it. "Word advice, maybe."
"Then stick to work," Nolan said.

"Touchy," Nate chuckled, getting up.

"I'm tired," Nolan said, glancing at the clock again. The minutes were ticking away. "You got what you needed?"

Nate nodded. "I think so."

"Good. Get out," Nolan said, waving his hand. With the smugness back plastered across his face, Nate wandered back to his desk. "Asshole," Nolan muttered, fetching his coat.

*

When Nolan finally pushed through their apartment door at quarter past seven, the familiar scent of garlic and herbs greeted him. Grace stood at the kitchen counter, her back to him, the rhythmic tap-tap-tap of her knife against the cutting board telling him she'd already started dinner prep.

"Sorry I'm late," Nolan said, shrugging off his coat and hanging it by the door. "Nate needed help with the Entrendy campaign."

Grace turned, wiping her hands on a dish towel. A small smile played on her lips, but there was a slight tiredness around her eyes that told him she'd been waiting. "Entrendy? Nate? That's... unexpected."

"Tell me about it," Nolan said, moving to kiss her cheek. "Josh wants him to do the swimwear line."

Grace's eyebrows shot up. "You're kidding. That's huge for him!"

"Nope. No jokes." Nolan opened the fridge and grabbed a soda. "He actually came to me for advice."

Grace laughed, the sound light and genuine. "I bet he loved that."

"You have no idea," Nolan said, leaning against the counter. "But I think I actually helped him. We've got a solid concept now for Sunday's shoot at Josh's pool. That's Nate's problem. But your cowboy was being an asshole today."

"What did he do?" Grace asked, looking up, putting down the knife aside.

"First, he was being a dick about the whole thing where he gets to drive your truck," Nolan said. "Then he was digging me out for staying late helping him out. Saying I'm always so... accommodating."

"Jesus. I told him not to go out of his way to be a dick to you," Grace said, and Nolan felt a certain warmth from his girlfriend's protective fierceness.

Nolan shrugged. "It's fine. I threw him out."

"You did?" Grace said, softer now, turning toward him.

Nolan's eyes trailed her top to bottom, soaking in all of the details of his hot girlfriend for the trillionth time. How he admired and adored her…

"Of my office," Nolan clarified.

Grace grinned, coming over to run a finger down the middle of Nolan's chest. "That still counts," she said.

"So dinner..." Nolan began, knowing full well it was already on pause. Grace smiled, then playfully shoved his chest.

"Poor man, you must be hungry from such a day," she purred, snaking a hand up behind his neck, pulling him toward her. Nolan knew she was strong, but feeling it was always such a welcome experience. Her other hand slithered down and grabbed at his ass. "Let me feed you something."

He grinned, leaning down to kiss her, a soft, lingering kiss that quickly deepened as her body pressed against his. He felt her fingers tug at his belt, and the sound of the zipper being pulled down was all the invitation he needed.

"You're the best," he murmured against her lips.

"I know," Grace replied, her hands pushing his trousers down.

The rest of their clothes followed in quick succession, a trail of discarded fabric leading to the bedroom. Nolan's hands were everywhere, exploring her body with the familiarity of long years together, yet still finding new ways to make her gasp. Grace responded in kind, her nails raking down his back as Nolan hoisted her onto the kitchen counter and entered her in one smooth motion.

The cool marble of the counter was a stark contrast to the heat building between them. Grace's legs wrapped around his waist, pulling him deeper as they moved together, their rhythm building slowly at first, then faster, more desperate. Her hands clutched at his shoulders, her head thrown back as she moaned his name, the sound driving him on.

"I can't believe you let him drive your truck, while I'm not allowed near it," Nolan groaned, not able to shake Nate's jabs.

"Were you jealous?" Grace gasped.

"Of his shitty Golf being dead?"

"Of him driving my truck," Grace said, smiling as he dug his face into the crook of her neck.

"A little bit," Nolan admitted, but that didn't deter him from continuing.

Grace's nails dug into his skin, and her breathing grew ragged. Nolan knew she was close, and he redoubled his efforts, his own pleasure building until he couldn't hold it anymore. Grace's cries echoed through the apartment as he spilled himself inside her, his hips bucking uncontrollably as he rode out the wave of his own climax.

"Fuck..." Nolan groaned, resting his head against her shoulder as they both struggled to catch their breath. "That was..."

"Yeah," Grace agreed, her hands moving to stroke the back of his neck.

They stayed like that for a few moments, enjoying the closeness, the intimacy of their bodies pressed together. But then them being naked in their kitchen, dinner only half-prepared, kicked in, and the two of them burst out laughing.

"Dinner can wait," Grace said, reaching over to grab her clothes.

"Mmm, I don't think it can," Nolan replied, checking the clock on the oven. "It's almost eight. We should probably clean up," he said, reluctantly pulling away from her.

Grace chuckled, sliding off the counter and reaching for her clothes. "Fair enough."

They fell into an easy rhythm, Nolan moving to help with dinner while Grace finished the salad. The conversation started with a bit of teasing banter between the two before it drifted from work to weekend plans to the upcoming ballet performance Grace had been rehearsing for. It wasn't a huge thing, but something the studio had put together for the autumn season. By the time they sat down to eat, the slight awkwardness of Nolan's lateness had dissolved completely into the comfortable domesticity they'd built together.

They finished their meal with comfortable conversation, clearing the dishes together as they'd done countless times before. Later, curled up on the couch with a movie playing on low volume, Grace rested her head against Nolan's chest, his fingers absently stroking through her neon blonde hair. They were watching something on TV, rounding out their day. But Nolan noticed that Grace was checking her phone every so often. Not constantly. Just a little more than usual.

"Expecting something?"

"No... just. Did... Nate say anything today?" Grace asked.

"About what? Other than the campaign and whatever?" Nolan asked. "Not that I can think of. Why?"

"Nate's been weirdly quiet. He's usually annoying me by now."

"You're complaining?"

"I guess not... Just noticed it, is all."

*

Nate was tapping beer into bottles. It was a hobby he occasionally dabbled in, but hadn't had time to waste time on in a while. He had some extra time that evening because he wasn't pestering Grace, so why not? He was a decent brewer anyway, and it was cheap. Besides work, he didn't have much to do, really. Temporarily.

He glanced over at his phone. It was within reach. She hadn't sent him anything. He'd even thought about messaging Grace twice already. Just a fleeting thought through his head. Normally, he would have, just to see what she was doing, to tell her to come over, or find some other reason to make himself a part of her evening.

But indeed it had remained a thought. No, not tonight.

Not only because he was bottling beer, but also because he wanted to know something. If he stopped asking, would Grace carry on? Or would she eventually notice herself that empty space that he usually filled?

Monday night passed without anything. Tuesday did too.

Actually, Tuesday morning, Nate bumped into Grace by the mailboxes.

"Morning," he said, behaving completely normal.

"Howdy," Grace grunted, as she was on her way out to work. A bit grumpy, perhaps.

But they each had their places to be, so that was it. She didn't even offer him a ride to work when he didn't ask.

On Wednesday, however, his phone finally lit up.

'You alive, cowboy?'

It was a small message; Nate had to read it twice. A grin spread across his face, though he knew better than to celebrate. There she was. Three days of silence was what it took. He was part of her routine now to such a degree that when he stopped, Grace reached. He had become expected. Whatever schedule she fought to keep together, apparently Nate had become part of it. There had been no excuse nor any invitation.

He finished bottling the beer before he replied, about twenty minutes later. He wasn't one to jump. Nate typed out an equally small reply. He kept it casual, as usual. *'Alive and kicking. Unfortunately.'*

The response was much faster than his twenty minutes. Nate looked over at the wall. Behind it sat Grace, sending him text messages like a little teenager.
'Shame.' Then another just after. *'Thought the Golf might've finally killed you.'*

Nate had to chuckle.

'Busy. Talk later!' Nate wrote, slumping down on his sofa to see if there were any good games on, tossing his phone into the cushions somewhere. He looked over at the folder from work.

Campaign documents, a few headshots of their model, along with a few notes Nate had written about what Nolan meant was the ideal model.

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Nate grunted as he stood from his chair, Anna holding the door for him with a smile that had grown more familiar to his presence. A short greeting, where Nate saw a mug of black coffee on his side of the table.

"Black, no milk. I remembered," Anna quipped. Nate saw that she still gave him one of the office mugs too. Nice. And ready before he even got here. Even nicer.

"Training's finally paying off," Nate chuckled, earning a knowing glance from his therapist. A glance that still held her smile, that made his cock aware of whom he was in the presence of. 'Training indeed,' he thought.

"And the Golf is still as reliable as ever?" Anna asked, taking her seat, crossing her legs. Nate's eyes glanced at her stockings. Nylon. Damn. And those legs... "Something about a hole in the floor?"

"I'm thinking of converting it to a Flintstone mobile - more eco-friendly, and at least I'll know why my feet are dragging," Nate said, taking his seat opposite her, grabbing the mug on his way. Anna laughed at that, something warmer than a polite smile and less guarded than the polite amusement she'd once given him. Nate grinned, taking a sip of the coffee.

"And the truck you've been borrowing?" Anna asked.

Nate slowly set his coffee down on the table, adjusting his seat a bit. "She texted me first today." Anna waited for the follow-up.

"Normally, I'm texting her, inviting her over, or finding some other excuse to bother her. This time I didn't. I stopped contacting her for a few days. Three, to be exact, until she texted."

"Why?" Anna asked, her voice void of judgment, intrigue, or any other emotion other than the professional progression of a therapy session. Nate gave half a smile.

"I wanted to see if Grace would simply carry on with her week without me. Or if she'd notice that I wasn't there," Nate said. "And she did."

"So you tested her," Anna said simply.

Nate disliked that wording. It made him sound like a pouty little shit.

"More like, observed," Nate said.

"By changing your behavior to see whether hers changed," Anna said, tilting her head a tiny bit, without breaking eye contact. "That's a test."

"Well, maybe," Nate conceded, a bit irritated. Anna was right when she was right. That's what's so useful about her.

Anna studied him, waiting for the next part. Nate reached for his mug again, taking a sip while he mulled things over.

"Why does Grace texting you matter so much?" Anna asked after a minute of stalling.

"Means she missed me," Nate bullshitted. He knew better than that. So did Anna, who barely raised her eyebrows.

"One text after three days doesn't prove that. Was it anything significant?" Anna asked.

Nate shrugged. "Not really, just teasing."

Anna nodded slowly.

"We talked about having a recognized place in someone's life," Anna said. Nate remembered. She was right then, and she was right now. Again. "Is this some version of you 'testing' your place? Do you think her sending you a teasing message proves your status? Do you not think that she may just check up on a person she sees pretty often and hasn't heard from in a few days? Maybe it doesn't necessarily speak of her routine, perhaps, but more about Grace herself instead."

Nate drummed his fingers on the armrest before he simply had to shake his head. It did sound exactly like Grace. It might not prove commitment, but it did prove that he was expected to be present in her life.

"You really enjoy being right, don't you?" Nate said with a small smile, one that was returned. "Maybe I'm not 'routine', but I am in her rhythm, I think. I mean, I have a toothbrush at my place that's hers, we've worked together, and as you know, I've borrowed her truck a bunch. Meals. I'm there, in her life. And when I wasn't, she noticed. That's all."

"If that's true, what's still bothering you?"

That was a good question. If you scaled back, Nate could see how he had been quite successful with Grace. She visited him frequently. Had gone on dates, and even some formal, public ones. And now she was texting him independently as well.

What more was there to gain?

Well, for sure, the constant battle of logistics. Grace had a series of things she wanted to have time for, which meant everything became almost a negotiation. A shoot there, a hook-up there colliding with some random shit Nolan wanted, whatever that friend of Grace's wanted. So on.

"I've been thinking maybe the problem isn't how much time I get," Nate said. Anna waited. "It's that every time we want to do something, it's a damn negotiation. Grace has a very crammed, and sometimes unpredictable schedule. It makes everything... uncertain. He gets the default; I just get whatever's left."

"And how do you think you'll fix that?"

"By simplifying it."

"For whom?" Anna asked.

Nate paused.

"You obviously want to be with Grace, and want to spend time with her, but you don't like that you have to negotiate, as you put it, every time you see her," Anna said. "Her boyfriend doesn't. You don't want to either, am I correct?"

Nate nodded slowly. "Exactly."

"So this isn't just about getting more of her."

"No," Nate replied.

Anna shifted, crossing her legs the other way.

"It's about knowing when."

Nate nodded again.

"I think so," Nate said. "Yeah. It would ease her mind in many ways."

Anna looked at him, as if she was studying him. It wasn't unnerving anymore. He was used to it. He had come to trust Anna a lot more. Maybe too much. That was a thought for another day. But that was why he liked her.

"What does Grace think?" Anna asked.

Nate sighed. "I'm not sure. She's dealing with a lot, as I said. I think she'd welcome predictability. And I honestly think she'd like to have more clarity around when we see each other."

"And what does her boyfriend think?"

"I don't know, I'm not a mind reader," Nate chuckled.

Anna drew in, and exhaled, resetting herself.

"Are you trying to make Grace's life easier, or secure more access for yourself?"

"Why can't it be both?"

"They can. It helps if you're honest about which matters more to you," Anna said. "And her boyfriend?"

Nate shrugged. "I think he'd tolerate it."

Anna's eyes narrowed a tiny bit. "He knows?"

"He knows."

"About you and Grace?"

"He knows enough," Nate replied.

"That's not the same answer. That's different from how you described this before," she pointed out.

"Things changed," Nate said, almost with another chuckle.

Anna waited again, in case there was a follow-up.

"So where does her boyfriend fit into whatever it is you're imagining?" Anna asked.

"Bickle'll survive," Nate said.

"Again, that's not what I asked. When you talk, you're talking of an obstacle more than anything," Anna pointed out. "Do you like him?"

Nate had to laugh.

"Does he like you?"

"Even funnier," Nate said. "No. I wouldn't think so."

"Then Nolan isn't just an obstacle in this. He's another person affected by whatever you're proposing. You need him to continue tolerating you."

"I don't need Bickle," Nate shot out.

"Does he know you're thinking about changing the arrangement?"

Anna had a point. Nate had to give her that. Bickle needed managing.

Anna shrugged. "You need something from him." Nate shrugged, somewhere between *'whatever'* and an admission. "How are things, then, between you and Bickle?"

"We had a small dust-up on Monday," Nate said. "Nothing major, just bossing him around a bit when he tries to be more than he is."

Anna raised an eyebrow. "If you need Nolan to tolerate your ongoing arrangement, but also an increased access to his own girlfriend, why do you keep antagonizing him?"

"It's fun," Nate said. "He's annoying, smug without realizing it, and keeps acting like he's my supervisor or something. It's just a bit of fun to get in under his skin from time to time. Can't have a guy like that too comfortable."

"In addition to sleeping with his girlfriend," Anna concluded for him. "Doesn't this sound like self-sabotage to you?"

"I can behave when it matters," Nate said.

Anna looked at him for a moment.

"Can you?"

Nate had to laugh. He could when he wanted to. Probably. But her point about pushing him too much would be stupid, stayed.

"You enjoy this, don't you?" Nate asked with a glint in his eye.

Anna looked genuinely surprised.

"Enjoy what?" she asked.

"Telling me I'm an idiot," Nate chuckled, earning a laugh from Anna and earning him one of her precious, pretty smiles.

"It's not usually this easy," she retorted.

"Can I ask something?" Nate asked. Anna shrugged. "You ever actually get a day where nobody actually bothers you?"

"Sunday, usually. But not often," Anna answered, then caught herself. "But we're not discussing my schedule."

"Fair enough. I was just making the point that schedules can be a bitch to keep," Nate said. Anna nodded. "With Grace, I'm not being some sort of idiot here. I know what the real world is. But ideally, there is a bunch of unnecessary friction because of that little pesky thing: lack of routine, to use that word again. I just want an ideal world where I know."

"Expecting predictable routines in what you describe requires that everyone actually wants that. Everyone," Anna warned.

Nate couldn't help but notice that the clock was four minutes past when their session should've ended. Anna hadn't yet.

"And routine, well, as you said, schedules are hard to keep. You say Bickle will endure, but that sounds like it's hypothetical," Anna said.

"Well, to me it seems like Grace obviously wants me around. We work well together, and she recognizes that," Nate said. "And as I said at the start, the text proved that. Or, is partial evidence of it, I guess."

"Partial," Anna agreed. Five minutes over. "She sees you as part of her life. That's clear. The question is more of a *how*. You're a neighbor. A colleague. A lover. And a friend. In some ways. There's a lot of you in there."

Nate gave a crooked smirk. "You know you'd make a good marketer if this therapy gig doesn't work out."

Anna then finally glanced at the clock, tightening her posture immediately. Not that it was ever loose to begin with. Not with this one.

"Oh, we're over," Anna said.

"Ah, six minutes," Nate said, making a point of checking his wristwatch. "You're slipping, Doc!"

"Don't make a thing of it," she said. "It happens."

"Not to you," Nate chuckled. Anna gave him a look as he stood. "Six minutes... you owe me a beer!"

Anna stood as well.

"I don't socialize with patients," she said. Though, met with the same mood as his teasing.

"Worth asking," Nate said, meandering toward the door, escorted by her.

"Was it?" Anna asked.

Nate shrugged and went his merry way.

Before driving home, Nate sat in his old Golf for a bit. This week had been an absurdly productive one. At work, he had a new gig from the big man himself. Then Grace initiated contact when he stopped. Anna, even after their little discussion, had given him six extra minutes.

Three days was what it took for Grace to reach out. That was how long before Grace came looking. Nate smiled. Maybe the thing he'd been considering wasn't so fucking ridiculous after all.

*

It was Thursday evening. Grace was soaking in her bathtub, relaxing after an extra painful day of work, and an even worse ballet rehearsal. When she got home, her dear Nolan was already busy making dinner, and after, he ate her. And most importantly, she hadn't checked her calendar all week. She could hardly complain.

It had been odd. So much stress with her schedule, but most days, she had just... gone home. Or to practice, or done everything she wanted without... anything. It was nice not to have to balance everything.

"Need anything?" Nolan asked, poking his head through the door. "I'm changing the lights on my car, so I'll be outside."

"You're doing that all by yourself? Oh my, make sure to clean your hands afterwards," Grace teased. Nolan was busy trying to look through the bubbles. That man always had an appetite for her. And her for him, honestly. "Shoosh."

And Nolan disappeared.

Grace heard her phone buzz and found herself wondering if it was Nate. She grabbed it, just to see who it was. It was some client. Grace put the phone away again, returning to her bath, slightly more annoyed.

"Jesus," she muttered. Three days and apparently that idiot had her wondering where the hell he was? He who never shuts up finally shut up.

Apparently, she had gotten too used to him being annoying. And even in his absence, he was somehow still being a nuisance.

Grace sank down in the tub. She had checked in on him to see if he was alive. Apparently, he was. Alive enough to be busy at least.

Whatever.

Grace eventually got out of the tub, her skin still pink from the heat. She wrapped herself in a thick robe, the terrycloth rough against her sensitized skin. In her bedroom, she discarded the robe and pulled on one of Nolan's old t-shirts, the soft, worn cotton smelling faintly of him. She was sitting on the edge of her bed, toweling her hair dry when she heard the front door open, then close again. Nolan's footsteps were familiar in the hallway, followed by the clinking of tools being set on the kitchen counter.

"All done," he called out. "Lights are changed."

Grace smiled, dropping the towel and padding out of her room. She found him in the kitchen, sleeves rolled up to his elbows, grease smudged on his forearms. He was pouring himself a glass of water.

"Come here," she teased, stopping in front of him.

Nolan set his glass down, his hands coming to rest on her hips. "What's the verdict?" he asked, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

Grace leaned in, sniffing him theatrically. "You smell like oil and hard work." She wrapped her arms around his neck. "And a little bit like home."

Nolan's arms tightened around her waist, pulling her flush against him. "Good," he murmured, his lips finding hers. The kiss was brief, but tender. "Now go to bed. You've had a long day." "Only if you join me," she countered, her hands sliding down to rest on his chest.

Nolan's breath hitched. "Give me ten minutes to wash up."

"Five," Grace bargained, stealing another quick kiss before pulling away and disappearing back down the hall. Nolan watched her go, a small smile playing on his lips. He finished his water, then headed for the bathroom for a quick shower.

Grace was already in bed, her blonde hair fanning out against the pillow. Nolan slipped under the covers and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close. Her body was warm and pliant against him, and he could feel the tension in his own muscles easing as he breathed in her scent. She let out a contented sigh, her hand finding his and lacing their fingers together.

"Doing anything after work tomorrow?" Nolan asked.

"Nope. I'm actually free," Grace said, again without having to check. Then she realized how unusual that sounded. "Other than a small lunch with Dora on Saturday, I'm free."

"No Nate?" Nolan asked. Even he noticed his absence.

"I saw him earlier today, on his way to work. Same as the other day. But that was it," Grace said. "His little 'howdy'. I almost expected him to stop, but he didn't."

Nolan nodded. "And your 'Autumn Reverie' performance, that's next Sunday?"

"It is. So this Sunday, I'm going to be worked hard by Evy. This week will be intense," Grace said, and their conversation continued about the ballet show, the two of them drifting off to sleep.

*

"Nate," Nolan called, coming over to Nate's desk.

It was late afternoon at work on Friday, and the place was almost empty, except for Nolan, and the few others from the political campaign. The rest had already left. Josh, the big boss himself, had gone out of the office for an important meeting. The marketing team was done for the day, most of them gone to the bar already. The usual Friday afternoon buzz had faded into a low hum of distant keyboards and the occasional rustle of paper. Overhead lights cast long shadows across empty desks, creating a stark contrast to the bustling energy that defined the workweek. Even the coffee machine in the break room sat idle, its usual gurgle and hiss conspicuously absent. For Nolan, the quiet was both a relief and a reminder of the long weekend stretching ahead, full of possibilities and, perhaps, complications.

Nolan was still finishing some stuff up, and had just gone over Nate's plan for Sunday. He had actually done a hell of a job, Nolan had to admit. Josh had been right that his soap ad-instincts would translate to Entrendy. He was eager to see the result himself, even.

But.

"Yes?" Nate answered, not even looking up from his computer.

"My office, real quick."

Nate followed without a word, his heavy boots thudding softly against the worn carpet tiles. Nolan gestured to the chair opposite his desk, the worn leather groaning as Nate lowered himself into it. Nolan settled into his own chair, the swivel mechanism sighing beneath his weight, creating a small bubble of silence in the dimly lit office.
"Everything is set to go. It's looking really promising this," Nolan began.

"But?"

"The contract with the model. We agreed on a reel, and your plan is still that. That's not the issue," Nolan explained. "She's under a still-photography contract. We need that sorted."

"She agreed to the campaign," Nate said.

"She agreed to stills."

"She knows this is for social media," Nate said, turning as if to leave, dismissing him as if the matter was over.

"Social media isn't he issue. Filmed advertising is. It involves potentially different rates and usage rights, something we don't want to spring on her on Sunday. We don't wanna look like we're screwing over the model," Nolan explained. It might've seemed small, but it was a good thing Nolan caught it. The model wouldn't sue them, she wasn't like that, Nolan knew, but there was the danger still. And Entrendy's rep with models was a golden-framed picture.

"Fine," Nate sighed. "I'll fix the contract so she can sign it on Sunday."

"No. Today."

Nate raised his eyebrows. "She already agreed. She's getting paid; I told her the gist of what we were doing over the phone. She'll be professional."

Nolan nodded as he spoke. Everything Nate said was all well and good, but it didn't change anything.

"Get the release amended before Sunday," Nolan said, simply. Now the matter was over, and Nate could leave.

"It's my account," Nate retorted.

"I'm aware," Nolan replied. "And I'm the one signing off on it. The campaign was stills when you booked her; now we're shooting a video."

"You're the one who told me to do the fucking reel."

"Yes. Which is why I'm telling you to amend the release before we shoot it."

Nate shifted in his seat. He was clearly annoyed with Nolan, but Nolan was used to annoyed salespeople by now.

"I'll get it fixed on Sunday and have her sign it, fine," Nate said.

"Before she gets in front of the camera," Nolan corrected.

"It's a fifteen-second Instagram clip, not fucking Spielberg."

"Which Entrendy intends to advertise with. That's the point," Nolan said. If this were any other contract, he'd still be as stringent about the bureaucracy, but this was Entrendy. Josh might be a bit relaxed, but not one of his employees should be. Nate knew, Nolan knew. "Contact her

agency today, tell them we're doing a video, and get agreement on the amended terms. Today. She can physically sign the final release on Sunday. Before the camera rolls."

Nate dropped his hands onto his thighs with a weary thud, rolling his eyes as he settled deeper into the chair with a heavy sigh.

Nate leaned back, a low chuckle rumbling in his chest. "You know, when you sit behind that desk, you really get off on telling people what to do."

"I'm doing my job," Nolan said, simply.

"Funny. Doesn't seem to work so well at home anymore," Nate said, a small grin tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Nolan felt a small jolt of surprise at Nate's comment. It was an obvious jab, but the words struck a chord nonetheless, making Nolan's stomach drop. A small knot of frustration formed in his stomach as he felt himself flush a bit.

And Nolan saw that Nate saw.

Nate let out a dry, gravelly laugh, leaning forward in his chair. "That's the thing, isn't it?" he said, his voice low and rough. "You get to be all 'supervisor' in here. The one place you get to tell me what to do."

Nolan swallowed, feeling every inch of Nate's implication.

"You like it when I remind you."

"That's got nothing to do with this," Nolan said, steadying his voice.

Nate shrugged dismissively. "Grace doesn't seem to mind when I tell her what to do," he said. "She listens to me just fine."

Nolan's breath caught, his knuckles whitening where they gripped the edge of his desk. Heat prickled up his neck, a dangerous cocktail of indignation and that twisted little spark he'd come to recognize as arousal. His professional mask remained intact, but behind his eyes, images flashed. Grace's head thrown back, her breathless surrender, the way she yielded to Nate's commands in ways that made Nolan's stomach clench with jealousy and desire.

Nolan shook his head. He hated that Nate knew how being reminded of how Grace might sometimes choose Nate hit him.

"Or maybe," Nate drawled, leaning forward with that slow, predatory smile that made Nolan's skin crawl, "she just likes being told what to do. By someone who actually knows how to make her listen."

Nolan steadied in his seat. The first jab, fine. The second... Not so much.

"Grace chooses what she does with you," Nolan replied, coldly. "Here, you're working under me. Fix the release."

Nate stared at Nolan, and Nolan stared right back. He was trying to see if Nolan would waver. He didn't. He wouldn't.

"Before Sunday."

"Fine," Nate replied, although very reluctantly. "Anything else, boss?"

"Campaign looks good. Now, fuck off out of my office," Nolan said, standing up. Nate did the same. A curt nod after, and the old fart was out.

Nolan cursed. It was equally irritating as it was embarrassing. Nate always had to undermine him. And remind him. He couldn't stand how he was affected by his taunts, and that he could still feel how Nate had humiliated him through Grace. But whatever, the important part was to get that fucking contract in order.

*

Nate walked away, clenching and unclenching his fists. Not necessarily because of anger. It was more due to the frustration. Frustration over Nolan, and frustration over what Anna had said. Could he behave when it mattered? He needed Nolan to cooperate, still that little shit managed to drag it out of him.

But it wasn't all bad. He learned something. Or confirmed something he already knew. Bickle still reacts when pushed about Grace. Grace was still a lever against him. But Nolan didn't fold just because he reacted. It was useful. Annoying, but useful.

Now, where did Mirella have those fucking forms again?

*

Nate checked his wrist watch. He didn't really check the time. He knew it was well past when that model should've shown up. But it was important that all these other idiots saw that he checked the time.

They had set up around Josh's pool. The big man had come out to check on them, personally bringing refreshments and snacks for the whole crew before leaving the property for whatever he was doing. The pool was a standard Olympic pool, but the surroundings roared with wealth. A small deck on one side with a small roof, tables, and such, as if it were the Caribbean. Opposite, where they had set up most of the shoot, was a pool house. There was a hot tub over by the giant mansion. Lounge chairs. Green hedges. The water was crisp and blue. It was a good spot.

"Where the fuck is she?" Nate asked Jason.

"It's just ten minutes," he said, turning back to his lighting.

Nate had to fight back a snicker at that. He needed to be annoyed.

"Yeah, we have plenty of time," Chloe concurred. "It's not her fault her Uber cancelled on her."

"Hmph," was the only reply Nate gave.

Nate made a show of checking one of the electric dollies again, adjusting something. He looked out around the pool, imagining every single shot and angle once again.

Finally, the gate clicked, and the sound of high heels clicking against the stone path announced the model's arrival. Nate turned and saw a slender blonde woman walking toward him. She was tall, almost a head taller than Grace. Her hair was long and silky, falling over her shoulders in a way that was almost angelic. Her eyes were a pale blue, and her face was angular and elegant. The light green dress she wore accentuated her figure, hugging her curves and showing off her toned body.

"I'm so sorry I'm late," she said, her voice low and sultry. "The Uber cancelled on me last minute, and it took a while to find another."

She was athletic, confident. Effortlessly so, really. Definitely someone one would enjoy seeing in a bathing suit.

'Nice pair of tits, too,' Nate thought, watching Maggie's ass as she sauntered off to Jason. *'Nice ass too. Once upon a time...'*

But she was too polished. Too... empty. And more importantly, who she was not.

"No problem, we've got plenty of time," Jason replied, stepping forward and extending a hand. Nate checked his watch again. Fifteen minutes.

"Maggie," she introduced. She then turned to Nate. "Where do you want me?"

Nate's gaze swept over her, taking in the perfectly styled hair, the designer dress that probably cost more than his monthly rent. He let the silence stretch for an uncomfortable moment, the sound of distant traffic and the gentle lapping of pool water filling the space between them.

"We're already behind. I'm making a change."

Maggie froze, her hand halfway to her hair. "I... what?" Her perfectly composed expression cracked, confusion clouding her features. "I'm fifteen minutes late. There was an issue with the ride..."

"I understand. It's still my call," Nate said, easily, flatly.

Jason cleared his throat, glancing between Nate and the bewildered model. "Nate, it's really not a big deal. We can still..."

"Fifteen minutes," Nate said. "Josh wants a quick turnaround and efficiency. I'm not starting this campaign late."

Maggie's cheeks flushed, her hands clenching into small fists at her sides. "But... I already signed the amended release on Friday. When your agent called. The one for video content. I was assured everything was fine."

Nate looked at her for a moment, then turned away, already moving on.

The crew shifted uncomfortably, a murmur of whispers rippling through them. Perhaps they saw him as a lunatic, or perhaps as an unreasonably severe boss. It didn't matter.

Chloe stepped forward. "Was that really necessary? She seems genuinely sorry about the delay."

Jason sighed, running a hand through his hair. "And what are we going to do without a model? We have this whole setup..."

Nate turned back toward Maggie.

"I signed the new release Friday," she reiterated through gritted teeth.

"Then you've got a souvenir," he replied.

She was a bout to reply, but perhaps she saw defeat. Her shoulders slumped, yet she looked like she was still fuming. She spun on her heels and headed away. No doubt that wouldn't be the last of that.

Sam and Jason, and a few others, gathered around Nate; an awkward silence stretched among the crew. Nate knew indeed there might be a reprimand in the future, but it was worth it.

"What now?" Jason asked. "Do we call the agency?"

"No, that's too slow," Nate said. "Besides, Maggie might already be telling them all about us."

The crew exchanged a look at 'us', but Nate didn't care.

"Someone local? We have that girl on the weather who does a bit of this sort of thing? Or that former teacher turned model," someone said.

Nate shook his head.

"Why not that woman from the soap campaign?" Chloe asked. "Grace?"

"Grace?" Nate asked. "I don't know. She had something important today."

Nate rubbed his cheek, pretending to think. "Though, she is perfect for the role, and she is down the street. Josh has mentioned her name before too."

"Doesn't hurt to call," Jason said. "Might actually hurt more not to call."

"Good point," Nate said, fetching his phone.

It was a huge gamble, all of this. If Grace told him to get fucked, he'd have pissed off an agency, no model, and Josh to answer to. Or Mirella, most likely. But it was worth the shot. Nate knew fully well that Grace had this ballet thing she was doing with her class, preparing for something next weekend or whatever. He knew she was busy doing something that mattered to her. But calling her with something this urgent and this important was the next step. She would have to choose.

In the meantime, he had a light in his Golf to leave on.

*

Grace pulled her yoga pants up tight, pulled on a loose t-shirt that breathed well and that she could sweat in, preparing herself for a hard morning of Evy working her and the rest of her class as close to perfection as possible. The 'Autumn Reverie' wasn't a huge show of two thousand upper class judging her, but it was still something Grace really looked forward to. She had started ballet just to stay in shape and because she liked to dance. Then she realized that her class liked to do these little shows. And that's how the ball started rolling.

Three times, sometimes four, a week, she had been at the studio. Thank fuck she had hired an extra employee at the landscaping, because she was sore as fuck most days. She'd manage, but the luxury of an extra set of hands was nice.

Nolan was a trooper as well. They always split who made dinner somewhat evenly, but lately, he took the brunt of it. In addition, he helped her relax, either by being just awesome, or more physically: providing baths, a bit of a foot and back rub, and of course, sex. He was a good man, her Nolan.

And then, her phone buzzed. She had just gotten herself a coffee, and had been on her way to her car, and it was the damn idiot.

"This better be good, I'm on my way," she said.

"It's pretty important," Nate's voice came through. "The model didn't work out."

"What?" Grace asked, stopping on her way. "What happened?"

"I'll explain everything. But, listen, you're perfect for the shoot, and the pay is really good. I know you're doing your ballet rehearsal or whatever," Nate asked.

Grace sighed. She knew where this was going.

"I have a rehearsal I need to go to," she explained. "How long will it take? I really need to get there, and my teacher's gonna be pissed."

"Listen. It's Entrendy, Josh. I don't wanna ruin your rehearsal, but if you're our lifeline on this one, I can't even explain the career opportunity that this will be," Nate began. "The crew is here and everything; we just need someone to make this thing right."

"For fucks sake... What exactly is this?" Grace asked, moving a hand to her temple, feeling thoroughly annoyed.

"What's going on?" Nolan asked.

"Hold on, Nate," Grace said. "It's Nate. Apparently their model didn't work out. I'm here, Nate."

"It's just a swimsuit thing. We're making an Instagram reel; we need a few angles and such," Nate replied.

"Does Josh know about this?"

"Not yet; we're kind of in a hurry, but he will. But he talked about you for Entrendy before, so that won't be a problem," Nate said.

"Hold on again," Grace said, turning to Nolan. He knew these things more than she did. "It's the Entrendy thing that Nate is doing."

Nolan's face turned from curiosity to look like something had dawned on him.

"Fuck me," he muttered, closing his eyes. Grace could see him grow flustered. "Athletic, confident, effortless. You'd be perfect for sure."

Grace had to smile. Even in clinic mode, Nolan still was sweet.

"I won't lie," Nolan said. "This is big. If you want to do more modelling, you can't really know when these opportunities arrive."

Grace nodded, looking at him.

"But Evy will be pissed," Nolan added.

"But this is real work," Grace said. She knew fully well what was at stake here. But 'Autumn Reverie' would be next Sunday. And the show would be on for a few weeks. If she blew this, all her hard work and dedication would be for nothing. One practice too little could be everything. But if she was part of an Entrendy campaign, this could open some serious doors.

Grace felt the pull in two directions, a physical tension spreading across her shoulders. On one hand, there was Evy—the strict but brilliant instructor who'd been pushing Grace and the other dancers to their limits for weeks now. Missing today's rehearsal meant missing crucial run-throughs for 'Autumn Reverie.' She could already hear Evy's clipped disapproval, feel the disappointment that would ripple through the other dancers. She'd worked too hard, sweated too much, to risk jeopardizing her place in the show now.

But then there was the other hand. This opportunity that had landed in her lap with such unexpected urgency. The soap campaign had been fun, a lark almost, but this was Entrendy. Josh's brand, the one that every fashion-conscious woman in the city seemed to be wearing. Josh had noticed her work before, and she knew him well enough, and he had seen her as one with talent. The thought of that. The idea that she'd caught his attention enough to be considered sent a thrill through her. And now, here she was being called in as the solution to their problem. Not because she'd been booked weeks in advance, but because they suddenly needed her, specifically her.

The decision crystallized in her mind with startling clarity. Evy would be pissed, and probably the rest of the class too, yes, but the ballet studio would still be there tomorrow. The Entrendy campaign? This particular moment, this urgent need that had them calling her instead of dozens of other models. It wouldn't wait. That rush, that feeling of being wanted and needed exactly when someone was desperate? That was addictive.

"Fuck it," she said aloud, the words feeling like a release valve for the tension coiling in her chest. She looked at Nolan, seeing the mix of concern and excitement in his eyes. "I'll be there in twenty minutes. You owe me. Big time, cowboy."

Evy was not pleased at all. Grace could tell from the stiffness in her voice that this was a huge wrench into their plans, what they had worked for. Evy gave a dry, humorless laugh when Grace gave the news, and was rather short. It was to be expected. And that laugh told Grace that she was in a world of trouble next week. So be it.

Arriving at Josh's place, it looked a bit different. She had been up here a few times to draw up some plans for fixing his property into a park, or a garden; he couldn't quite decide, but as she rounded the house, and the cars and trailers, the scenery was more of what one would expect from a photoshoot.

She spotted the camera crew and immediately recognized Chloe, Jason, Sam, and a few others. There was one of those camera things that moved the camera while you filmed, Grace had no idea what they were called, lighting, red tape around to mark up the ground, the whole ordeal. For all his faults, Nate was really competent when it came to his job.

"Grace," Chloe greeted, walking up and giving her a quick hug. "I'm so happy you came!"

"Yeah," Grace smiled.

"Hey, you," Nate's voice came, and Grace turned to see him approach.

"Hey!" Grace said. "Where's your model? Didn't you already have someone booked?"

"Didn't work out," Nate explained. "Let's go. Wait, sign that contract on the table over there, and make sure to read it, then Chloe will fix you up... if that's even possible, Jesus. Those jeans..."

Grace giggled. The attention of men was no stranger to her, but Nate's boldness wasn't always welcome, but today she didn't mind it.

"Since when did you care about the details of a contract?" Grace chuckled.

"Come on," Chloe said, leading her to a small table, and the papers she had to sign.

Grace glanced at the contract, a standard release, nothing that stuck out, and signed.

"Okay, come on, we'll fix you up. We're in a hurry," Chloe said, and Grace followed her back.

Chloe led Grace to a small clothing rack tucked away by the pool house, three swimsuits hanging from velvet hangers.

"These are what we're working with," Chloe said, her fingers lingering on the fabric of each piece before selecting the first one. She held it up against Grace's frame - a vibrant coral number that seemed to catch the sunlight just right. "Let's start with this one. Classic triangle cut, ties at the neck and back. It'll pop on camera, especially against that blue water." Her eyes swept over Grace's athletic frame appreciatively. "Especially on you, girl."

"This is going to be freezing," Grace muttered.

"I'll have a robe for you between shots. It's thin, but really warm."

"Entrendy?"

"You bet," Chloe quipped.

Grace slipped behind a modesty screen, the flimsy fabric doing little to muffle the sounds of the crew setting up outside—the clink of equipment, the low murmur of voices, Jason's occasional directions. She shed her jeans and t-shirt, the cool morning air raising goosebumps on her skin. The coral fabric felt cool too, smooth against her sun-kissed skin. She tied the strings with practiced ease, having done this before, but something about the scale of this production made her fingers fumble slightly.

When she stepped out from behind the screen, six pairs of eyes swiveled toward her. The casual appreciative glances she was used to at the beach or pool were replaced with something more clinical. Nate was there, arms crossed over his chest, his expression unreadable as he looked her up and down. Jason, who seemed to be Nate's right-hand man, squinted at a monitor, his thumb adjusting the focus. Sam, the lighting tech, tilted a reflector, his eyes appraising how the light hit her curves.

"You're perfect," Nate said, his voice carrying over the low hum of equipment. "Now, walk over to the pool edge. Just natural movement."

Grace took a breath, aware of every sensation. The way the fabric shifted with each step, the slight bounce of her breasts that she tried to control without looking stiff, the cool tile under her bare feet. The camera whirred to life, its red light blinking like an unblinking eye. She felt exposed, but not in a shameful way. More like a specimen under a microscope, her every move being recorded and analyzed. She pushed the feeling down, channeling it into confidence, just as she did on stage during a performance. This was different, but not so different, really. She was here to sell something. More than just a swimsuit, but an idea of effortless perfection. And as she reached the pool edge, the water shimmering behind her, she caught her reflection and saw exactly what they wanted: athletic, confident, and undeniably Grace.

"Perfect," Nate said, before Grace even did anything. "Loosen up a bit, relax. Then, Jason, headshot, but roll back the camera into a full-body shot as she walks."

"From here?" Grace asked, looking down. She had walked over to one of the red tapes.

Grace rolled her shoulders forward, then back, three times, then shook. Standing on one leg, she raised her leg and pressed it toward her belly, then did the same with her other leg. It was something she had learned at ballet, and a small jolt of guilt shot through her as she knew her fellow dancers were now sweating their socks off. Or, rather, stockings.

But it helped. She closed her eyes, drew in, ignored the coldness of late autumn, and found her center. Her focus sharpened.

"That's good," Nate said. "Walk, and look straight ahead."

Grace obeyed, and heard the sound of the camera. The click of the shutter, the whir of the lens moving, and the gentle splashes of water as Jason adjusted the tripod.

"Perfect. Now, turn, and walk towards the other end of the pool," Nate said.

The work came naturally after a few takes. Filming versus photography, Grace wasn't really fazed by the difference. She felt her smile as she walked back toward the camera again, and that earned her a thumbs-up from Nate.

"Now, get in the pool," Nate said.

"Do you want me to dive, or use the stairs?" Grace asked, noticing the springboard.

"You can dive?" Nate asked. "Every day's a lesson! Go ahead. We'll do both."

"But I'd need to prepare that shot. That's a lot of action," Jason complained.

"Got it. Prepare for the diving as much as you can while we shoot the stairs first. I'll operate the camera," Nate instructed. He really was a problem solver, Grace figured. He was so quick and… again, competent. "Then we'll have a short break so Grace get her warmth back, and you get to set up the camera."

Grace descended the pool steps, the chill of the water sending goosebumps across her skin as it crept up her thighs. She submerged herself with practiced grace, emerging from the water with a smooth, fluid motion that seemed almost effortless. As she slicked her hair back, droplets glittered in the light, and a small gasp escaped her lips—unplanned, genuine. Nate's voice cut through the air before the camera even stopped rolling.

"Do that again," he commanded, his tone leaving no room for negotiation. "The hair slick back, the reaction to the water. Again, but natural like you just did."

So she did, letting her fingers glide through her damp tresses as she arched her neck, the second gasp more deliberate but no less real, the coral fabric of her swimsuit clinging to every curve in a way she knew only did her favors. Jason gave a low whistle behind the camera, and even Nate allowed a rare, almost imperceptible smile of approval.

The shoot evolved into a series of fluid moments. Grace twisting in the water, sunlight catching the droplets that clung to her skin like tiny crystals. Each time Nate called out direction, she found herself responding with instinct rather than calculation. She wasn't afraid to show off, and that seemed to go over well. A laugh bubbled up as Jason misstepped near the pool's edge, and Nate captured the genuine smile before she could compose herself.

"More of that," he said, grinning. "That's what we need."

Grace turned in the water, but as she looked toward the mansion, she saw a woman come toward them. She was wearing business attire: a suit jacket, red blouse, and a matching set of suit pants. She wore sunglasses, and with her frown, she looked like stern incarnate.

"Oh, fuck me," Nate muttered, and Grace looked over at him. She was surprised to see him... almost cower. Not really, Nate didn't do that, but as close to it as he would've gotten. "Okay, let's wrap up the in-pool shoot, then we're taking a... A five-minute break. Probably more."

Jason gave a questioning glance.

"Mirella," Nate answered.

"Fuck," Jason replied, looking over at the stern brunette watching them with her arms folded. "What's up with the Mirella lady?" Grace asked. "Have I met her?"

"It's the boss," Nate explained. "Josh's right, left, and double left hand. Uppercut and hook, too. She's not fun. But continue."

"Maybe you can get her in a bikini," Grace chuckled before turning around to swim across the pool.

Grace swam back toward the camera, her movements fluid as the water parted around her. She emerged again, this time closer to the edge where Nate stood, droplets racing down her shoulders and tracing paths over the coral fabric. Nate motioned for her to turn, and as she did, sunlight caught the droplets clinging to her back, scattering light in prisms that made her skin seem dusted with tiny jewels. The camera whirred, capturing the moment.

"Perfect," Nate murmured, his voice barely audible above the gentle lapping of water. "Now, lean back, just float. Let your hair spread out."

Grace eased back, letting the water take her weight, her body going still and light against the cool surface. Her neon blonde hair spread out like spilled light across the dark water, strands tangling and drifting with every subtle ripple. Nate’s camera followed her in a steady rhythm, catching the way the coral swimsuit clung to her skin, how the sunlight made droplets glisten along her arms. Even in the chill, there was something effortless about the way she held

herself—unbothered, present. Another quiet breath escaped her lips as she floated, the camera absorbing every flicker of movement, every shift of water around her. It was less about the images it captured and more about the way she moved, the way she simply existed within the frame.

Jason adjusted the lighting, angling a reflector to catch the play of light on the water's surface. Nate directed him silently, their familiar collaboration evident in their minimal communication. The crew moved with practiced efficiency, their focus absolute.

"Just like that," Nate said. "Hold it."

Grace held the pose, her body a study in tension and release. She could feel the water supporting her, buoying her up. The chill had faded, replaced by a strange sort of peace. She closed her eyes for a moment, just breathing, feeling the sun on her face and the water on her body. It was almost meditative.

When she opened her eyes, she saw that Mirella had moved closer, standing at the edge of the pool, her expression unreadable behind the sunglasses. Grace felt a flutter of nervousness, but Nate gave her a reassuring nod.

"You're doing great," he said solemnly. "Ten-minute break, everyone. Chloe, get Grace a robe ASAP."

Grace emerged from the water, the chill returning instantly as she stepped onto the deck. Chloe had a white robe ready, which she wrapped around Grace's shoulders. She didn't lie, it looked light and thin, but Grace felt the warmth almost immediately.

"I'll grab some water," the pink-haired makeup artist said, bustling off. "Jesus, you're shivering and blue all over. We need more than ten minutes. That, or a spray tan."

Grace padded over to the chaise lounge, sinking down gratefully and relishing the softness of the thick cotton robe. Her muscles ached, but in a good way, like the pleasant burn after a hard workout. She also felt her legs unsteady. Probably the cold. Josh hadn't heated the pool due to the season, and the pool wasn't really being used. In fact, she had been the one cleaning it of leaves a few days earlier for work.

Watching Nate and Mirella from her spot on the chaise lounge, Grace understood immediately why Nate had cowered. This woman demanded respect without saying a word, just by existing. Mirella was beautiful, sure, but in a different way than Grace – all sharp angles and cold edges. High cheekbones, thin mouth pulled into a severe line. She looked like someone had carved her face from marble, then decided to make it scary too. Just standing there, she made the air feel tighter, like the whole backyard needed to straighten up its posture.

Her eyes, unreadable behind sunglasses, swept over the scene, holding everyone in a thrumming stillness. Her perfectly tailored suit declared authority, and even standing still, she radiated absolute control, making the air feel tighter, more disciplined.

Nate stood at attention, chin dipped slightly, a silent acknowledgment passing through his posture as Mirella's words sliced through the morning air. Grace was sure the big bad Nate Bertsch wasn't scared of Mirella, but he was definitely respecting her.

She had expected shouting and screaming, but it was far worse, at least for Nate, it seemed. She stood with her arms crossed, speaking in low, clipped tones that carried just enough for Grace to catch the odd word here and there. *'Fifteen minutes', ' cancellation fee',* something with an *'agency'*, and *'fired'*.

It started to fall together what had happened. Perhaps not entirely, but enough.

"Jesus Christ," Grace muttered, tightening the robe around her.

"Yup," Chloe agreed.

"Have I seen her before? Mirella?"

"Maybe her sister. Mona Marcetto," Chloe explained.

"Aaaah," Grace said, and Chloe disappeared over to where the refreshments were.

Nate tried to say something, but Mirella shot him down by lifting one arm from her tight fold. He simply nodded and started over to Grace.

"Fifteen minutes?" Grace asked.

"Fifteen minutes late," Nate explained.

Grace stared at him. "You are such a fucking idiot."

"And we're using the pool house as your wardrobe. Apparently it's cold out," Nate explained, adding an apologetic chuckle. "Grab a shower, just a rinse off and a bit of warmth, then we're back to it."

"And Mirella?" Grace asked, seeing the stern executive sit down in Nate's chair, crossing her legs, Chloe offering her something to drink.

"Mirella," Nate agreed, walking off.

The shower had done a world of wonders, she felt all warm and fuzzy now as she emerged from the pool house a few minutes later, steam curling from her bare shoulders, the warmth of the shower still clinging to her skin.

Across the pool, Nate was directing Jason and Sam with precise gestures. Even with Mirella sitting like a stone gargoyle in his director's chair, Nate had regained his composure. He pointed to the diving board, then to several camera positions, his movements economical but purposeful.

"Ready for the plunge?" Chloe asked, adjusting the straps of the green swimsuit across Grace's shoulders.

Grace chuckled, momentarily forgetting her own suggestion.

"No, literally."

"I forgot about that," Grace sighed. Looking down at the pool, water seemed much colder now, for some reason.

"Grace Harris?" she heard from behind her.

"That's me," Grace answered, turning around to see Mirella having made her way over.

"Did you read the release?"

"I did," Grace replied, feeling a bit on edge around this woman. Being face-to-face with those steel blue eyes, Grace felt the same that most other people probably felt around her.

"And you understand this includes video and paid social use?"

"Yes. We've shot a bunch already," she replied.

"And you agreed to the rate?" Mirella asked.

Grace smiled. "I did actually read it, you know," she chuckled. Mirella gave the smallest of nods.

"You modeled a bit before, professionally?" Mirella asked.

"That depends on how generous you are with the word 'professionally'," Grace replied. "A soap thing, just a few shoots with Nate. Pilot and for the campaign and such."

Mirella looked over at Nate. "Of course," she said. "Fine. Let's see if this was worth blowing up an agency relationship over."

Grace chuckled awkwardly while Mirella turned to head back to Nate's chair.

"Great," she mumbled.

She was effectively auditioning in front of the person who could decide whether this whole disaster was salvageable.

"Okay," Nate called out, his voice carrying across the pool. "We're setting up for the dive. Jason, you've got the side angle. Sam, I need backlighting on the splash. We want that halo effect."

The crew moved with renewed urgency, their quiet efficiency broken only by the occasional metallic clang of equipment. Mirella watched from her perch, her sunglasses reflecting the pool's shimmering surface, her presence a silent judgment.

"Grace. We'll do a few dives, but on some of them, try to emerge throwing your head back like before. Then, just get out, find a towel, sit down on a lounger and dry off. There are some sandals in your pathway," Nate said. "Chloe, be on standby with the robe."

Grace braced herself, then turned her focus inward. She felt her center of gravity shift, her body remembering the countless hours at the barre and the familiar thrill of leaping into space. The chill air seemed to ease as she got up on the board.

"Camera ready," Jason called out.

"On your mark," Nate directed. "Go."

Grace drew in a breath, held it for a count of three, then released as she launched herself into the sequence. Three quick steps, light, precise, building momentum. The board dipped, then sprang back, propelling her upward into the cold autumn air. For a moment, she hung suspended between earth and water, her body arced in perfect form—legs straight, toes pointed, arms reaching ahead. The coral swimsuit clung to her, the gravity in the jump highlighting every toned muscle.

She entered the water with a clean slice, barely disturbing the surface at first. A second later, the cold seized her. Her leg threatened to cramp, but Grace was able to fight it back. She swam upward, the motion sparking life in her stiffening limb, and soon she was breaking through to the surface with a gasp that was equal parts shock and exhilaration. She looked directly into the camera, trying to look confident.

Nate was already speaking, his voice cutting through her moment of reentry. "Again," he said, coming over to the edge. "One more time, but look directly into Jason's camera as you emerge. And smile when you emerge. Then do what I said before. Exit, towel, sandals, lounger."

Grace nodded, her wet hair slicked back, and swam back toward the diving board. The chill had become a constant companion, but she was getting used to it, and her body was warming itself from the effort.

"Camera ready," Jason said.

"On your mark," Nate repeated.

Grace pushed off the diving board, repeating the leap. She focused on her form, the chill receding as she rose into the air, gravity taking hold as she dropped toward the waiting water. This time, she emerged with a smile, the cold a welcome shock. Her breath caught as the water

streamed down her body, but she kept the smile in place, her hair dripping down her shoulders. She met Jason's lens with a knowing grin.

"Good," Nate said. "Now, get out, get the towel. And remember to be natural."

Grace swam over to the stairs, feeling her muscles protest, but not too badly. She had been sore before, and this wasn't unbearable. The towel was close by, and Grace snatched it up. Grace took a few steps toward the loungers, her eyes sweeping over the sandals along the path. They were flip-flops, with cute little flowers on them. She shoved them on and walked with her head held high over to a lounger and sat down.

"Cut," Nate said. He came over. "We need to do you coming up again. Maybe the whole segment. You're posing again."

Grace frowned at that. The cold and the critique. Mirella sat still, and Nate was already on his way back to the main camera. But she had been called here to salvage then salvage she would. She'd be the professional they wanted her to be. She closed her eyes, rolled her shoulders like before, and reminded herself to own her body. Either doing a pirouette into a jump, or walking around a pool in the freezing cold with the stern gaze of Mirella.

"When you emerged, it was good, though, the glance at the camera. So we'll do one without that, just to have that too," Nate said, taking his place.

The second take, the water was still numbing. When Grace emerged, she forgot to whip her head back, but nobody yelled cut, so she simply swam over to the stairs, went up, and threw her head back then, grabbing the towel, using it to ruffle her hair as she turned. Chloe gave her a thumbs up as she walked past, and Grace gave her a knowing smirk back, making her way past the camera and over to the lounger, not bothering with the sandals, sitting down to dry herself with the towel.

"That's it," Jason exclaimed.

"Good," Nate said. "Again, just to be sure."

"No."

Everyone paused. Mirella hadn't even raised her voice or stood up. She sat there with her legs crossed, her foot dipping lazily, but her face turned toward the main monitor, her sunglasses removed.

"Don't repeat it. You'll fake it," she said. Which meant everything about the last take was exactly what Mirella knew Josh would be looking for. Grace felt a smile grow.

"What next?" Grace asked.

"Let me see the rest," Mirella said, moving her gaze over at Jason, who reacted immediately. Nate was about to move over, but Mirella glanced over at him, and he stopped.

"Alright," Nate said, turning back to Grace. "Unless I need to fetch some popcorn for Miss Marcetto, we can work while she watches. Back to the lounge chair. We need a few stills and a long shot. And an establishing shot. Just sit there like you would."

Grace nodded. "Do you have an extra towel? Sunscreen?"

"What did you have in mind?" Nate asked.

"When I'm at a pool or at the beach, I like to wear sunscreen. And I use a towel to make a makeshift pillow so I don't hurt my neck," Grace explained.

Nate ran a hand over his stubble, looking over at the cameras, seemingly unsure. "Would you be moving around a bunch?"

"Try it," Mirella said from the chair. She turned to Chloe. "Get the other suits ready. And Nate, send me the selects before anyone touches them."

Grace's smile would've widened if it hadn't looked ridiculous on camera. They were keeping her! She had done the job they asked and then some! But time for a small celebration came later. Now was work.

"You move well on camera," Mirella said.

"I do a bit of ballet," Grace explained.

"That explains it. So did I," Mirella offered. She glanced at Nate. "Don't let him pose you too much. Josh always says 'don't work yourself stiff' when he directs."

"That's literally what I said. That's the concept," Nate complained.

Mirella waved for him as if to say *'by all means, execute.'*

Grace settled onto the lounger, arranging the folded towel behind her neck exactly as she would at any pool on a lazy afternoon. She tilted her head back, soaking in the pale autumn sunlight that seemed to have emerged just for them, its weak warmth barely combating the chill still clinging to her skin.

"Chloe, sunscreen," Nate called out, watching through the camera as Grace applied the lotion with practiced motions. Her fingers slid over her shoulders, down her arms, the motion fluid and unconsciously sensual. The camera whirred softly, capturing the way the light caught droplets still glistening on her collarbones, the subtle flex of biceps as she worked the sunscreen into her skin.

"Perfect," Nate murmured, his voice low. "Now just relax. Close your eyes for a moment." Grace complied, her breathing evening out as she settled into a false sense of relaxation that was pure performance. "Good. Now open them and look toward the diving board."

The second swimsuit was a deep forest green, its high-waisted bottoms accentuating Grace's athletic silhouette while the bandeau top emphasized the elegant lines of her shoulders. She walked along the pool's edge now, the camera tracking her movement with smooth precision. Grace allowed her hips to sway slightly with each step, not exaggerated but natural, a dancer's awareness of movement in her form. The silence was punctuated only by the soft slap of her bare feet against wet tile and the distant hum of equipment.

They continued doing much of the same shots with the second suit, then the third, a black one piece. The camera followed her every move: diving, swimming, emerging, lounging. Each shot a study in movement and repose, the light changing with the late morning sun. Grace's focus remained absolute, her body an instrument she played with precision and grace. She knew how to hold a pose just long enough for the camera to capture her, then shift into the next fluidly, as if choreographing a silent dance for the lens.

"Last take," Nate called out. "The black one. Just walk along the pool's edge again."

Grace complied, the camera capturing her confident stride, the slight flex of muscle in her calves as she navigated the edge over to her lounge chair. She found the sunscreen and started applying her two hundredth layer of it. Nate didn't stop shooting until she was fully relaxed on the lounger.

Mirella had been closer to the cameras throughout, letting the chair remain empty, paying attention. She didn't really offer creative help, but it was clear that she knew *exactly* what Josh wanted.

"Okay. That's enough, I think," he said. "Mirella, we're good here."

Mirella came over with the robe, as Chloe was busy collecting wet towels from the other takes. Grace took it.

"So... am I actually saving this thing?" Grace asked, a bit of nerves and coldness making her tremble a bit.

"You're not the problem here, Miss Harris," Mirella said simply. Grace took it as praise. Coming from Mirella, it practically was. Mirella turned to Nate. "But, Mr. Bertsch, finding an excellent replacement doesn't retroactively make firing the first model intelligent. You burned a bridge for Calhoun today."

"I wasn't going to say it did," Nate said.

"You were absolutely going to say it did," she retorted, earning a laugh from Grace.

The crew and the pool area slowly emptied. Grace was back in the pool house, taking a long, hot shower to wash off the chlorine and to warm her body back up, listening to the shoot getting dismantled piece by piece. She dressed in her yoga pants and t-shirt, and made her way back to the pool area. The crew had left, and most of their stuff had gone with them. Mirella was still talking to Nate, and Jason was packing up the last of their gear.

"Monday. My office first thing," Mirella told Nate. "And send me those selects."

Nate didn't get to reply, as Mirella was on her way over to a black Rolls-Royce. Grace stood there for a moment, the reality of the day settling in. She had just nailed an Entrendy shoot. She felt excited, happy, relieved, but she couldn't help her thoughts as they drifted to Evy, to the class she was supposed to be a part of, the rehearsals she'd missed. But at the end of the day, with how it had gone, Entrendy had been worth the risk.

"Hey, great work out there," Chloe said, coming over with a smile.

"Yeah, you really banged it out," Jason said.

"Material is looking excellent," Nate concurred, starting to make his way around the mansion. Grace sort of just followed him, as that was where her truck was parked anyway.

"You got a chance to look at it?" Grace asked.

"A bit here and there, and of course during. It's going to be some good stuff," Nate continued, nodding his own approval.

"I'm just happy I could help," Grace smiled. "And that Mirella thought I did a good job."

"Yeah," Nate said, sighing. He looked tired. "Listen, Grace. I'm really sorry. I know I should've given you more time, but I didn't know how to tell you what was happening, and–"

"It's okay," Grace interrupted. "You're a bit of a shit, but I know you didn't mean to be. Sometimes, at least."

Nate chuckled. "I'm not sure whether to take that as a compliment, but I guess I'll take it."

"I liked it anyway. Like with the soap thingy, I really enjoyed myself," Grace continued, realizing she meant it. It had been hard, sure. Cold and tiring, but she felt energized now. Electric. She rolled her shoulders, but the tension in them didn't seem to loosen up just right.

Nate opened the door to his rundown Golf, the suspension complaining as he sat down.

"Maybe you should get a new car? How do you even go to meetings in this thing?" Grace asked.

Nate turned the ignition, but instead of starting, the Golf coughed uselessly. He tried a second time, with the same result. Grace smiled.

"Nothing's working out for you today, is it?" she asked, earning a laugh from the older man.

Nate tried again, and the Golf didn't do shit. He then looked up at the ceiling lamp. "Fuck me," he muttered.

"You need any help?" Jason asked.

"The battery was a piece of shit anyway," Nate said. "You got cables?"

"No," Jason said.

"Oh for fuck's sake, get your shit. I'll take you," Grace said. "Deal with this tomorrow."

"You're a life saver. Again," Nate grunted, following her to her truck, waving goodbye to Jason.

"Don't make me regret it," Grace said, writing a quick text to Nolan. *'Shoots done. Heading home. Nate's Golf died, giving him a lift.'*

Finally.

*

'Shoots done. Heading home. Nate's Golf died, giving him a lift.'

Nolan had just received the text as he finished cleaning up the dishes. He allowed himself a small amused smirk, reading how that piece of shit car finally died. Grace had been gone for about six

hours now, which was a long shoot, but probably necessary. He figured it was a bit more complicated to have her be a replacement. He was just glad to hear that she'd be home soon. If there was one thing he knew for certain, it was that Grace loved ballet. And this had to be eating at her, even if it was a great career opportunity.

Selfishly, Nolan was dying to see how she'd look in the swimsuits. How she'd look on camera. But also see that confidence he had fallen in love with captured on video. He had seen her do her thing on the soap thing, seemingly naked under a bunch of bubbles, and it was amazing. He could only imagine her prancing around the pool in a swimsuit.

But not only that. Nolan had given input to what sort of model they needed. There was an element of pride knowing that Grace had fitted that bill. Perfectly, Nolan had to admit as he thought about it. He had practically described her when describing what they needed.

Nolan put on the stove, in anticipation of Grace's arrival. He figured she'd want something warm and easy to eat, so he had prepared a creamy potato-leek soup he could finish quickly once she got home.

Nolan went out into the open corridor to see when Grace would arrive. And lo and behold, her truck came rolling into the parking lot four floors down, sliding easily into one of their parking spots in front of the building. Nolan turned to head back inside, hearing the car doors opening and shutting behind him.

He moved the casserole over to the stove and was about to turn the heat on when he heard voices outside in the open corridor. Excited voices, some energetic laughter. He frowned, and moved over to the front door. He heard Nate, also talking loudly. From the tone of them, it had gone well. And he swore he heard something about Mirella.

Nolan smiled.

The voices grew louder as footsteps echoed down the corridor. He pictured the scene: Grace's voice bright with fatigue and excitement, leading their procession. Nate's deeper tones followed behind, punctuated by the jangle of keys. Any second now, he'd hear the shuffle pause—Nate at his door, Grace at theirs. The sound would split: keys in Nate's lock, Grace's steps slowing just outside where Nolan waited in the doorway.

But they both stopped at their neighbor's door instead.

He heard them stop, and they were talking animatedly. He couldn't make out the words, but the tone was clear. Success. Excitement. He waited, expecting Grace to say her goodbyes and come home. The minutes stretched, and Nolan felt a small knot tighten in his stomach. He could hear them murmuring, then Nate's door opened.

Nolan heard an exchange, something low, then a soft laugh from Grace. The door to Nate's apartment clicked shut, its sound final and absolute in the sudden quiet of the hall.

Silence.

Nolan stood by their door, his hand resting on the handle, listening to the silence. He had expected her to come home, to walk through the door, tired but triumphant, ready to tell him all about the shoot.

Perhaps she was just going in for a minute to chat a bit, or to help with camera stuff.

But it shouldn't have been surprising.

Nolan went over to the stove, turning the soup on low, covering it. He then turned off the kitchen light and walked back over to the living room to watch some TV. He briefly looked at the clock. It was past 6 PM, so not that late.

Ten minutes passed. Twenty.

Nolan understood Grace wasn't stopping by for a few minutes.

The minutes stretched into a half-hour, the low murmur of the television doing nothing to fill the space left by her absence. Nolan's fingers tightened around the remote, the plastic pressing into his palm. Each commercial break became an invitation to imagine, a dangerous opening where images bled through the walls next door. He could almost picture it. Grace's blonde hair spilling across Nate's cheap sheets, her laughter turning to breathy sighs that he knew too well. The same sounds she made with him, but different somehow - rougher, more desperate, given over to a man who didn't deserve the softness of her. The thought sent a current through him that was equal parts humiliation and a dark, unwelcome heat that settled low in his gut.

He shifted on the couch, the fabric suddenly rough against his skin. The scent of the cooling soup drifted from the kitchen, a domestic comfort that felt like a taunt. This was their life. Their routines, their shared evenings, their home. And right now, she was choosing another version of it in the apartment next door. Nolan knew, rationally, that this was temporary, that she always came back to him. But in this moment, stretched out alone on their couch while his girlfriend was likely being claimed by their neighbor, that rational knowledge did little to ease the ache in his chest or the uncomfortable stir of arousal that made him press his thighs together. He wasn't panicking; this was familiar territory now. A different kind of intimacy - one forged in absence and imagination, where he was both excluded and unwillingly invited into a scene he couldn't stop playing in his head.

A thump against the wall followed by a laugh that seemed to die quickly.

Nolan closed his eyes, imagining it. Grace's hands on the wall, bracing herself, a sharp gasp as Nate's mouth found her throat. Maybe he'd kiss her the way she liked, soft and slow at first, his tongue teasing hers before his teeth sank into her lip. Nolan could picture it too easily.

But then silence returned.

For a while, he didn't hear anything. He wondered if he went over to the kitchen, which was closest to Nate's bedroom, if he could hear anything.

Forty minutes.

Nate had needed her for an emergency, and when the emergency was over, the work was finished, Grace could've walked through Nolan's door. Instead, she was now in Nate's apartment.

Nolan leaned his head back, thinking about what was going on behind their neighbor's door, letting that burn, that painful arousal grow in his gut. The idea that Grace was in Nate's apartment, that after Nate being an asshole to him all week, he was now fucking his girlfriend, and most likely better than he ever had. Nolan let that thought fester, let his painful arousal grow.

Nolan felt the shame in the fact that he couldn't stop imagining. Imagining how they might move together, the sounds Grace would make. He was hard now, aching and frustrated, and every part of him wanted to go knock on Nate's door and beat the shit of him simultaneously, as he wanted to go next door and see exactly how Nate was claiming what was his.
An hour ticked by.

The television's glow washing over him in meaningless waves of light and sound. Nolan realized he hadn't absorbed a single scene, hadn't followed any plot. The characters on screen moved and spoke, but their drama felt distant, irrelevant compared to the one playing out just beyond his wall. He had been seated in front of this TV for way too long.

Eventually, as Nolan came to terms with the reality that one hour would bleed into more, he pushed himself off the couch. He turned the burner off with a decisive click, the silence that followed feeling heavier than before.

*

"That hit the spot," Nate grunted, sliding his giant cock out of Grace as he rolled off, a thick trail of slimy white trailing down her left ass cheek.

"Mhmmmmm," Grace concurred, looking over at their asshole neighbor as he fetched the keys to the handcuffs. "Getting hit from the side is just... so good."

"Tell me about it," Nate chuckled. He undid the cuffs and slid off the bed, heading for the bathroom, the door clicking shut behind him.

Grace turned around to look at the clock, realizing she should probably go home. It was almost 9:50 PM, and Nolan would've gotten dinner ready. She sighed. It would be so much better to stay in Nate's warm bed. It felt like heaven right then. Her muscles ached after the long day of work and the ballet training the last week. And her whole body ached after Nate's pounding, as if she was still feeling him inside her.

For a fleeting moment, she found herself comparing the two. Nolan had also provided plenty of sex when she needed, but the way Nate just owned her body was something she had really been missing.

After rubbing some life into her wrists, Grace reached for her panties and yoga pants, putting both on, followed by her bra and t-shirt. Nate came out of the bathroom and slumped down on the bed next to her.

"It's getting late. Gotta head home to Nolan," Grace said.

Nate looked at her for a moment. Not like he did when he wanted to get between her legs, or that smug, cocky smirk he usually had.

"You do this every time," Nate said.

"What?" Grace asked, getting up, still smiling after everything.

Nate gestured toward her, getting ready to leave. Grace looked down at herself.

"That. As soon as we're done doing whatever we're doing, you start looking at the clock like you've got somewhere you're supposed to be," Nate said. His voice wasn't pouting, nor accusatory. He was merely stating a fact.

"I do have somewhere I'm supposed to be. Home," Grace said with a chuckle, grabbing one of Nate's feet, giving it a little playful wiggle.

Nate sat up against the bed frame, looking at Grace.

"Yeah. Home," Nate said, looking at her. "It's the same every time. If I want to see you, I ask. Every time you want to come here, or we're trying to arrange something, it's the calendar. Then you have ballet, work, Bickle, your friend, and whatever else. It has to be negotiated each time."

Grace raised an eyebrow.

"You're complaining because I have a life?" she asked.

"No. I'm complaining because you've got seven lives and you're trying to cram it into one calendar, and you're running your head against it every week," Nate said. "What if you didn't have to?"

"What?" Grace asked, crossing her arms.

"What if we just made it simpler? That you didn't have to decide who's appointment is in the way of who every day?"

"What does that mean?" Grace asked.

"Set days," Nate said simply, looking at her.

Grace did not like the sound of where this was going. "Nate..."

"Hear me out," Nate said, holding his hands up defensively, but sat up in a more... open posture. "Three days with him. Three days with me. One day where neither of us gets to bother you unless you want us to."

Grace felt her belly drop a bit. Did Nate really think she could agree to this? This was insane, what he was proposing.

"Three days? That's so..." Grace began, looking for the right word.

"Predictable. Simple. Less to think about. No more juggling or last minute texts about who gets who when. Just... a pattern. A rhythm." Nate's tone was even, reasonable. "Three there. Three here, one where you can tell us both to fuck off."

"I heard you," Grace said, rubbing the back of her hand against her temple. Why did Nate have to be such an idiot sometimes? This was exactly the sort of situation they were worried about. "That's insane."

"Why?" Nate asked.

"Because that is not a schedule," she said. "That's basically me dating you."

"You eat here. You leave your shit here, and shower however much you want. I've borrowed your truck. We even go places together. This week you check whether I'm alive when I shut up for three days. Whatever you want to call it, Grace, I don't really give a shit. I'm talking about what we're already doing," Nate said. "But it would be simpler if we had a better arrangement."

Grace sighed, her hand moving down her face. She was just stalling leaving now, stalling even looking at him.

"For three days, you wouldn't have to leave. Or worry about when you should. You'd know. I'd know. He'd know," Nate said. "No checking the time, no wondering if you've overstayed, double-booked yourself..."

That gave Grace a pause. She did hate her calendar. And the chaos it brought. And the guilt. And... well, being on a schedule even when she was living out the lifestyle her and Nolan had embarked on. She'd be less on a needle.

"And on your days, you're off limits for us both unless the princess says otherwise," Nate said, adding a chuckle. "Maybe you could force the two of us to split the bill on your spa day with your friend. I don't know."

"Nate... that's a very dangerous thing you're asking," Grace said, finally looking at him.

"I'm trying to solve a problem," Nate said.

"You're trying to take over my life," Grace retorted, turning to head out the door. "And Nolan isn't going to agree to me disappearing for three days."

"You wouldn't be disappearing. That's the point. He'd know," Nate said.

"That's different. Because Nolan is my boyfriend. The one I hope to marry one day."

"That's the part I don't get. You already make time for me. You already come over a bunch, you already stay now and then. But every single time, we act like it's some brand-new decision," Nate said. "I'm not asking you to give me something you don't already give me. I'm saying we should stop giving you a headache, making you decide if it fits from scratch every single time."

"We're already doing the bulk of my suggestion already. Look at today. You had ballet. But you came to the shoot. Then you drove me home, then you came in here. Now, you're looking at the clock because apparently at some point all of that stops counting and you're supposed to be next door," Nate continued. "You treat me like something that happens between your plans, but in reality, I'm already one of the plans."

"Again, I'm not asking for more time. I'm asking you to admit some of the time is already mine."

His?

"My time isn't yours," Grace bristled.

"Poor choice of words. But you know what I mean. I'm just saying it would be easier for all of us if we didn't have to make the same decision seven times a week."

"It sounds awfully much like you're trying to make yourself my boyfriend," Grace said. The word even felt funny in her mouth talking to Nate about it.

Nate didn't say anything at that. He was giving her space to imagine it.

What was it? Three days? It sounded so orderly. But it would give her back some of that control. Her schedule had been a mess for weeks. But surely one wouldn't consider something like this just because of a few calendar headaches?

Though, it wasn't just the schedule. It was three days where she didn't have to wonder if sleeping over would bother Nolan. It would be three days Nolan knew, and where she didn't have to feel

like she was just going out out of the blue. Like today. Nolan was probably fine with her going over to Nate's for a bit, but she didn't have to assume if they both knew.

It would give her so much more control.

And that appeal almost scared her.

"You've thought about this way too much," Grace said finally.

"Yeah," Nate admitted. No chuckle, no tease.

Grace looked at him then. She had glanced at him now and then, but his proposal had been so ludicrous she could barely even look at him. But now she did. He was serious about this... routine thing.

"No. That's too much," Grace said.

Nate shrugged. "Think about it."

"I already said no," Grace said.

Nate shook his head, the barest hint of a smile touching his lips. "There's a difference between something being 'too much' and something being impossible."

Grace grabbed her phone and headed to the bedroom door. "I said no, Nate. Good night," she said, grabbing her jacket and heading out of the apartment, leaving Nate on the bed.

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